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Viewing cable 07BAGHDAD1498, UK DEFENSE SECRETARY SAYS BASRAH TO TRANSFER BY

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 001498

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SUBJECT: UK DEFENSE SECRETARY SAYS BASRAH TO TRANSFER BY

AUGUST

BAGHDAD 00001498 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Daniel V. Speckhard for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On April 30, UK Secretary of State for Defense Des Browne told the Ambassador that August is a key month for UK forces in Basrah. If all goes as HMG plans, Multi National Division-Southeast will transition Basrah to provincial Iraqi control (PIC) and hand the Basrah Palace keys over to a GOI-entity, preferably the 10th Division Commander. Browne said the plan takes into account USG palace evacuation and security requirements. The Ambassador cautioned that the transition should neither make a mockery of the PIC process nor leave the Palace open for a JAM takeover and/or looting. Browne said Basrah, despite its troubling instability, was on the path to meeting PIC conditions by August. He argued that keeping UK forces at their current strength beyond August was not feasible given British military commitments to the NATO mission in Afghanistan. He also stressed that keeping UK forces in Basrah would not solve Iraq's grim political situation. Browne and the Ambassador agreed Maliki and his government must immediately make demonstrable progress on national reconciliation. They said that the window of opportunity for Iraqi political leaders was closing as ethno-sectarian views within Iraq were hardening, Sunni government leaders were losing all faith in the process, and D.C.'s patience was waning. END SUMMARY.

UK's Basrah transition plan

¶2. (C) On April 30, UK Secretary of State for Defense Des Browne told the Ambassador that HMG intended to transfer Basrah to provincial Iraqi control (PIC) by August, adding that London intended to also transfer control of the Basrah Palace to the GOI at the same time. Browne gave assurances that UK forces would continue providing security to USG personnel in the Palace until they completed their move to the Basrah Air Station. He cautioned, however, that providing support after early August would become increasingly difficult due to London's military commitments to the NATO mission in Afghanistan. He said the UK force buildup plan for Afghanistan hinged on the August transition. The Ambassador stressed that for a successful and legitimate transition, the Coalition must ensure that Basrah first meets the conditions for transferring security to provincial Iraqi control, as defined by the Joint Committee for the Transfer of Security Responsibility. He also said that Iraqi authorities needed to be sufficiently capable to guard Basrah Palace against a JAM takeover and/or looting spectacle. Browne was confident that Basrah was on track to meet the PIC conditions by August, adding that the UK was working closely with the GOI to find a tenant for the palace that could properly protect it. Browne said they are strongly recommending to the GOI that the Palace be turned over to the Iraqi Army's 10th Division.

According to Browne: Tale of Woe with Few Glimmers of Hope

¶3. (C) Browne described the Basrah situation as depressing and incomprehensible. He doubted a continued large UK force presence could change the situation. The violence against UK forces and innocent citizens is increasingly 'chilling' and the political system is nonexistent. He questioned how Basrah became one of the most unstable areas of Iraq when it does not suffer from the two major threats to Iraq: Al Qaeda and sectarian divisions. The Ambassador said he was hopeful that Prime Minister Maliki would carry out his recent pledge to restore security to Basrah, but recognized that this was only part of a larger political solution that was needed to bring Basrah stability. Browne said he was hopeful that

Najaf's marjaiyah would apply pressure to provincial political leaders to correct the situation. The Ambassador and Browne surmised that SCIRI/Badr Corps might be the only force capable of cleaning up the province. Browne expressed a bit of optimism, pointing to a few successes in Basrah, such as the thriving Umm Qasr port and the professionalism and growing competency of the navy and army in the area. Nonetheless, he reiterated his argument that Basrah's complex political problems could not be solved militarily, and certainly not by the UK's forces. He lamented that Basrah in August might be 'as good as it gets' for some time.

Reconciliation

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14. (C) Browne said he thought the window of opportunity for reconciliation was closing, particularly given the environment of terrorism and the flaws and weaknesses in the Maliki government. The Ambassador said he was concerned with what appeared to be a hardening of sectarian views among Iraqi leaders, as well the diminishing loss of whatever faith Sunni leaders such as Vice President Hashimi may have had in the Shia-dominated government. He acknowledged that Iraqis were on a slower timeline than the Coalition. Nevertheless, he said that he remained optimistic and was encouraged by a few recent developments, such as Anbaris joining the Iraqi Security Forces to fight Al Qaeda and the recognition by Tawafaq and other prominent Sunni leaders that Al Qaeda is their real enemy. The Ambassador said that in his conversations with the PM on the subject, Maliki comes across as supportive of reconciliation. Browne agreed that he had witnessed some of Maliki's "Mandela moments." However, Browne said he was not entirely convinced that Maliki does not see all Sunnis as Bath'ists or Al Qaeda collaborators. The Ambassador said Maliki may revert to this thinking when there are spectacular attacks on Shia, but otherwise Maliki seems to judge Sunnis as individuals. Both the Ambassador and Browne agreed that it was critical that they continue pressing Maliki to move forward with reconciliation, stressing to him that he should act while he and his Shia government are in such a strong position and have maximum Coalition support.

SPECKHARD